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PROGRAM Nightwatch

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SUBJECT American Hostages/Dale Van Atta Interview

TERENCE SMITH: This holiday season American hostages are still being held captive in Lebanon. Mediator Terry Waite of the Anglican Church seems to be making some progress, but still has failed to get them out.

There's also still a big question mark about at least one of the hostages. He's William Buckley, a political officer in the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. In October Moslem extremists said that Buckley had been executed.

Here's the way State Department correspondent Deborah Potter reported the story when it broke last October.

DEBORAH POTTER: The blurry photograph of a man partially wrapped in a blanket was delivered this morning to a respected Beirut newspaper. The terrorist group Islamic Jihad, which claimed last week to have executed Buckley, today offered to turn his body over to the United Nations in exchange for the release of 100 Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails.

The American Embassy in Lebanon said the picture does appear to be of Buckley. There is a strong resemblance to this photo of Buckley released by the kidnappers last week. But officials in Washington said they do not regard it as convincing evidence that he is dead.

The State Department also denounced the proposed exchange, calling it grotesque and an insult which outrageously violates the principles of human decency.

Buckley was the chief political officer at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut when he was kidnapped from this mainly Muslim

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section of the city in March of 1984. He has been held the longest of the six American hostages and he's the only American official in the group, making him an obvious target.

The Islamic Jihad claims he was killed to avenge last week's Israeli bombing raid on the PLO headquarters in Tunisia that killed more than 70 people.

U.S. officials say they're working on the assumption that all the American hostages are still alive. As one official put it, "We don't want to make a final call if there's any room for doubt." But another senior official said today that it's his personal guess that William Buckley is probably dead.

SMITH: It's been more than two months since the claim that Buckley was dead. Nothing much has changed on the State Department's official position on the case. But syndicated columnists Jack Anderson and Dale Van Atta recently quoted intelligence sources saying Buckley is definitely dead.

Joining us now with more details, Dale Van Atta.

Dale, welcome. And tell us the story and tell us how you got it?

DALE VAN ATTA: The story, basically, is that William Buckley was transported last March from the Bekaa Valley, which is in Eastern Lebanon, disguised as an injured Iranian revolutionary soldier, along with several other soldiers, in a Syrian army helicopter and taken to Damascus. They did not want the Syrians to know that they had him in the helicopter or that they were going to put him on the plane. That's why they disguised him.

They then took him on this plane, which had just brought in a foreign ministry official, took him back to Teheran and put him in a house on a street called Feresta (?) Street. In this street, he was held for at least a week, until an Iraqi rocket landed nearby and nearly decimated the house. They then moved him to another location near the holy city of Qom.

During these times, alternately, he was taken to the basement of the Iranian foreign ministry and interrogated there, and beaten, we are told. And eventually, because of the beatings and because of the torture that had begun in Lebanon, he died of a heart attack in a Teheran hospital.

SMITH: Without disclosing your specific sources, how did you get this story and what corroborative evidence do we have of it?

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VAN ATTA: It is difficult to work around not disclosing sources. But we have good U.S. intelligence evidence of it. There are some intercepted communications that we have. We have a source in the National Security Agency who's provided information since May '83 proving Iranian involvement in many of these kidnappings and bombings. There are also good sources that I'm in touch with in Lebanon, in the intelligence community there, as well as Mossad. There is no doubt...

SMITH: Which is the Israeli intelligence.

VAN ATTA: Which is the Israeli intelligence service.

There's no doubt by anyone that Buckley is dead, that I have talked to, has access to intelligence information. There is some disagreement about him being taken to Teheran. But there's no doubt that he was tortured and that he died.

SMITH: Why was William Buckley separated out for such special treatment?

VAN ATTA: The CIA, according to the sources that I have in the CIA, believe that he was singled out because the Syrians tipped off the Iranians that he was the CIA station chief in Lebanon. So he was someone who possessed tremendous knowledge of our counter-terrorism efforts, who we had as agents and those who were CIA people in the Middle East. So he was a tremendously valuable intelligence capture.

SMITH: Do you think he was taken by the group known as Hezbollah, the so-called Party of God, that it is assumed has taken some of the other American hostages in Lebanon?

VAN ATTA: Yes. We believe that he and the other five were taken by Hezbollah and held in the Bekaa Valley in Eastern Lebanon.

SMITH: And the Iranian connection. What explains that? Is it just Khomeini's notion of a Shiite revolution in the Moslem World, or what?

VAN ATTA: Well, there are any number of reasons. Covert support of Iraq, which is the same reason they've been attacking French facilities. Anti-Westernism. They believe Westernism has been a great evil in the Middle East, and it's time to eradicate them, in any way. It wasn't just getting the multinational force out of Lebanon, but any American in the entire Middle East.

SMITH: Yeah, but there's a specific demand that these people have made, which is the release of Shiite compatriots in

Kuwait who were arrested for some bombings there in December of 1983. If that's the demand -- well, let me ask it as a question. So far as you know, is it still the demand for the release of the other hostages? And is there any movement on it?

VAN ATTA: So far as I know, it is still the demand, and there is very little movement on it. The Kuwaitis are obdurate about this because it's a very gut reaction on their part. It's their decision. But because last December, when the Iranian-backed terrorists stole the Kuwaiti airliner and killed two Americans, they also during that time took a fire ax and put it in the back of one of the Kuwaiti diplomats there and made him scream over the radio by twisting the fire ax in his back.

The Kuwaitis broke off negotiations then about releasing the terrorists they had in their custody and refused to negotiate again. And they remember that.

SMITH: In the time we have left, what evidence is there about the well-being and whereabouts of one other hostage, whose name has not been mentioned by Reverend Benjamin Weir and the others who have come out of there, and that's Peter Kilburn (?).

VAN ATTA: Peter Kilburn is a difficult case to talk about. He is as sensitive as Buckley because he has been separated from the other four, and was a long time ago. For many months, U.S. intelligence believed that he was dead, that he had suffered a heart attack, probably on the way out to the Bekaa Valley. But now there is some very, very recent evidence that he's alive and being held in a very strange way by a strange group.

SMITH: A different group than is holding the other four.

VAN ATTA: Not Hezbollah. Not Hezbollah. And they are negotiating on this.

SMITH: Terry Waite. Is that mission likely to bear fruit, in your opinion, in the coming weeks?

VAN ATTA: It could. He has an impressive record. It could.

SMITH: All right. We'll have to see.

Dale Van Atta, thank you very much for coming in and talking with us about what is, particularly at the holiday time, an excruciating story.